

Suburban GOP Vetoes Medicare Fixes

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WASHINGTON-Congress' cure for the government's controversial prescription drug plan found few converts among suburban Republicans.

The Illinois delegation stuck mainly to party lines in Friday's House vote to give the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services the power to negotiate with drug companies over the cost of medication for Medicare recipients.

"When you analyze the legislation and look at the details, I've come to the conclusion that seniors are far better off without the government setting prices," said freshman U.S. Rep. Peter Roskam, a Wheaton Republican.

The government kicked off its Medicare Part D program last January with extensive hype and expectations of giving relief to seniors and the disabled. The initiative offers government subsidies on medicine through private insurance companies, but computer glitches and confusion over the myriad plans marred its early days.

Now, however, a majority of seniors say they're satisfied with the plan, and that's what caused Rep. Judy Biggert, a Hinsdale Republican, to cast a no vote.

"My seniors are really happy with it," Biggert said.

"Initially it was thought the monthly premium would be \$37, but the average is \$23 and the average savings for seniors is \$1,200," she said.

Both Roskam and Biggert predicted getting the government involved would limit choices for Medicare participants.

"The big risk when the government is involved in price setting is that you have the probability of limited access to drugs that are very important to seniors," Roskam said.

But Rep. Jan Schakowsky, an Evanston Democrat, faulted the pharmaceutical industry for spending millions lobbying to ensure negotiating for lower prices wasn't in the initial bill. Now they're reaping the profits, she said.

"It's been great for them and bad for Medicare beneficiaries and very bad for the taxpayers," she said.

Implementing Medicare Part D cost \$30 billion in 2006.

The bill anticipates that the intervention of the government with its massive buying power will ensure savings.

"Medicare does make sure that prices are reasonable and affordable for every benefit from wheelchairs to hospitals but it is prohibited from doing so for prescription drugs," Schakowsky said.

The AARP endorsed the bill and a Kaiser Family Foundation study found 81 percent of seniors favored allowing the government to negotiate for better prices. But President Bush has pledged to veto the legislation if it passes the Senate, saying that drug costs already are being reduced because of market forces.

Schakowsky remained optimistic.

"We're hoping the American people will help us pass this legislation," she said.

U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk of Highland Park was among a slim number of Republican supporting the bill. But he missed the vote because he was talking to constituents, a spokesman said.

"I think there's a fundamental principal here: We should always authorize the government to spend less of the taxpayer money where possible," Kirk said.

While the veto appears inevitable, Lynda DeLaforge, co-director of Citizen Action Illinois, a watchdog group, said the legislation enacted as part of an aggressive push by the new Democrat-controlled Congress was still meaningful.

"This symbolic first step makes sure Medicare Part D continues to improve. There will be a lot more specific bills coming out over the next few years," DeLaforge said.

George Weber, a coordinator for the Illinois Senior Health Insurance Program at the Arlington Heights Senior Center, has helped countless residents choose the right Part D plan.

His personal opinion was that the bill could lead to price controls that will stymie research and development.

"Without the ability to recover the huge costs of development, you'll have fewer and fewer drugs developed," Weber said.

Rep. Don Manzullo, a Republican who represents McHenry County, opposed the measure while Democratic Rep. Melissa Bean of Barrington voted "yes."

Former U.S. Speaker Dennis Hastert, a Yorkville Republican, did not vote.

Daily Herald staff writer Eric Krol contributed to this report.